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ABSTRACT

Theories of family structure have proposed that in healthy families, the parents' marital alliance is primary (MAP), while in dysfunctional families the primary alliance is not marital (MANP) but crosses generational boundaries. Some family alliances involve triangulation, drawing a third person into a dyadic relationship to mediate tension. Family relationships were examined in 309 college students who completed a Family Background Questionnaire about their past and present family relationships and their current adjustment to college. A sub-sample (N=88) participated in more in-depth structured interviews and completed the UCLA Revised Loneliness Scale. Analysis of the questionnaire responses revealed that MANP students who indicated that no sibling was available to join the triangle after the student entered college were performing poorly in academics and were more likely to consider counseling than were MAP students. Interview data further revealed that MANP students reported being lonelier than MAP students, and students who indicated more contact with one parent reported being lonelier than those indicating equal contact with both parents. These findings suggest that the integrity of generational boundaries is important to the functioning of individual family members and that the negative effects of cross generational alliances can be buffered by other family members who can be triangled into these alliances. (NRB)

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FAMILY TRIANGLES AND COLLEGE STUDENT ADJUSTMENT

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Psychological Association,, Boston, MA, March 21-24, 1985.

(1) Title

Family Triangles and College Student Adjustment

(2) Topical Session Preference

Personality (Family)

(3) Problem

Numerous family therapy theories have proposed a relationship between family structure and the development of symptamatology in children (e.g., Bowen, 1978; Haley, 1980; Minuchin, 1974). A primary concept in discussing structure, and one that cuts across theoretical models, is that of generational integrity. In the healthy family generational boundaries are maintained, that is, a certain separation between the generations in terms of the roles taken and the relationships considered appropriate is sustained.

An important way that generational boundaries are reflected in the family is in terms of the two person alliances that are formed. Several researchers have indicated that in dysfunctional families it is more likely that the primary alliance is not between the parents (e.g., Lidz, 1963; Madanes, 1980). Dysfunction then, is associated with primary alliances that cross-generational boundaries.

Alliance structure has been shown to be an important variable in non-clinical populations also. Using an interview technique with college students Teyber (1983) found that students who indicated that the primary alliance in the family was marital were less likely to be on academic probation than students who indicated that a non-marital dyad was primary.

Another concept discussed by family theorists (e.g., Haley, 1967; Bowen, 1978) that relates to the particular primary alliances that are formed is that of triangulation. In triangulation a third person is

drawn into the relationship between two other people as a way of mediating tension or conflict in the relationship.

The purpose of this study was to replicate and extend Teyber's work and look at the relationship of several structural variables to a wider range of measures that reflect level of functioning in three areas - academics, help seeking, and social relationships. The general hypothesis was that decreased functioning would be associated with a student's perception that the primary alliance is not marital. An added dimension was that the nature of the primary alliance was determined using an indirect and a direct method. Furthermore, students were questioned about past and present primary alliances.

This study also examined the relationship of other siblings as possible mediators or "buffers" of a subject's involvement in a cross-generational alliance. If a child who is over-involved with a parent leaves home the focus might be placed back on the parents' relationship, unless there is another sibling who can be triangled in. It would be expected that the presence of a sibling buffer would mediate the deleterious effect of a non-marital primary alliance.

Finally, this research hypothesized that a non-marital primary alliance would also be reflected by skewed contact with parents (more contact with one parent than the other), and that this contact skew would also be associated with the student's level of functioning.

(4) Subjects

Subjects in the first part of the study were 309 undergraduate volunteers under 21 years of age, whose parents were both living and had never separated or divorced. A sub-sample (N=88) participated in the second part of the study and received course credit for this.

(5) Procedure

Subjects in the first part of the study completed a Family Background Questionnnaire about their past and present family relationships and current adjustment to college. In this part of the study determination of the primary alliance was made by comparing the student's rating of their overall relationship with mother, father, and their rating of the parents' relationship. If the rating of the parents' relationship was at least as high as the rating of their own relationship with mother or father they were designated marital alliance primary (MAP). If the rating of the relationship with mother or father was at least one point higher than their rating of the parents' relationship they were designated marital alliance not primary (MANP).

In the second part of the study the sub-sample participated in a structured interview that covered the same material in greater depth. They also completed the Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, Peplau, & Cutrona, 1980). These students indicated, in a forced choice paradigm the past and present primary alliances in their families.

Other family structure variables included: (1) whether or not the student had more recent contact with one parent than the other (SKEW) and (2) whether or not a "buffer" sibling, at home or elsewhere, had more contact with the parents than the sibling (BUFFER).

Adjustment indicators were: (1) poor grades (GPA below 2.00) (2) receiving or considering professional counseling since coming to college; (3) the UCLA loneliness score; and (4) a composite index based on 1 and 2.

(6) Results

Separate analyses were performed for the questionnaire and interview samples. Using the questionnaire data a 2 (type of primary

alliance) x 2 (buffer) analysis of variance was performed on grades and yielded a significant interaction, F (1, 267) = 3.817, $p < .05$. MANP subjects who indicated that no sibling buffer was available were performing less well academically. Another 2 (type of primary alliance) x 2 (buffer) analysis of variance on the composite adjustment measure also yielded a significant interaction, F (1, 271) = 4.831, $p < .05$. Again, MANP students who did not indicate a sibling buffer were more likely to seek or consider counseling, and were doing less well academically. There were no significant main effects for alliance or buffer in these analyses.

Using the interview data a 2 (type of present primary alliance) x 2 (buffer) analysis of variance on consideration of counseling produced a significant interaction, F (1, 84) = 4.050, $p < .05$. MANP students who did not have a sibling buffer were more likely to consider counseling. Using type of past primary alliance a 2 (alliance) x 2 (sex) analysis of variance yielded a significant main effect for alliance on loneliness scores, F (1, 84) = 4.419, $p < .05$, with MANP students being lonelier than MAP students.

Finally, a 2 (skew) x 2 (sex) analysis of variance on loneliness scores resulted in a significant main effect for skew, F (1, 84) = 3.922, $p < .05$, with students who indicated more contact with one parent being lonelier than those indicating equal contact.

(7) Implications and Conclusions

Students' perceptions of family alliance and contact patterns are associated with adjustment, suggesting that (1) the integrity of generational boundaries is important to the functioning of individual family members and (2) the negative effects of cross generational alliances can be buffered by the presence of other family members who

can be triangled into these alliances.

One contrary finding was that past alliance structure is related to the formation of current social relationships. Structural approaches to the family postulate that only the present structure of the family should relate to functioning. These results suggest that a lifespan approach to the alliance structure of the family may be useful in understanding some areas of individual functioning.

Future research should compare sufficient numbers of students who identify themselves as being involved with a parent in a primary alliance, with students who indicate a primary marital alliance. It would also be useful to incorporate parents' and siblings' perceptions and more direct observations of family functioning.

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